



# Stalled

*God expects His will and desires to be carried out.*

## **GENESIS 11:1-9**

Advertising has a tremendous influence not only on the purchasing decisions of individuals but also on an entire culture. The most successful advertising slogans in our culture bring the company to mind when we hear them. “Just Do It” and “Where’s the Beef?” are slogans many of us are familiar with. For years, one fast food chain’s slogan was “Have it Your Way.” Recently, they modernized it with “You Rule.” Their marketing people understand human nature—we want to be in control. The only problem is that we are not in control. God is, and He expects us to obey Him.

○ Why do people find it difficult to give up control of their lives?

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# UNDERSTAND **THE CONTEXT**


## **GENESIS 10:1–11:26**

Genesis 10 is often referred to as “The Table of Nations.” It lists a total of seventy descendants in the family trees of Shem, Ham, and Japheth—Noah’s sons. Glancing at chapter 10 may give one the impression that it contains very little that is really profitable for believers today. But as we consider what the chapter reveals about God and what was happening in that time, this survey of the most significant descendants of Noah provides us with important information.

Genesis 10 must be read in its literary context. The language of blessing and cursing in Genesis 9 reveals why it is important to know that there were distinct and separate nations scattered about. It indicates that these peoples were “spread out” and “scattered” (10:5,18,32), that “the earth was divided” (v. 25), and that they each spoke according to their own languages (vv. 5,20,31), but it does not explain how these things came about. Therefore, the Tower of Babel account in 11:1-9 is important because it reveals how God intervened and caused these nations to be divided and dispersed to these other places and how it is they began speaking different languages. So the events in 11:1-9 chronologically precede the dispersion of the nations in chapter 10.

Concerning God, chapter 10 demonstrates the fulfillment of His blessing on Noah and his sons to “multiply and fill the earth” (9:1). It shows that God’s blessing was on all the nations through Noah. This foreshadows God’s blessing on Abraham that would be for all nations, a blessing fulfilled in the person and work of Christ (12:2-3; Gal. 3:6-9).

Concerning Noah and his sons, they obeyed God’s command to “spread out over the earth and multiply on it” (Gen. 9:7), as evidenced in chapter 10. In contrast, chapter 11 reveals the disobedience of the people who, instead of spreading out and filling the earth, settled in the Plain of Shinar and built the Tower of Babel (11:1-9).

 **As you read Genesis 11:1-9, consider what it reveals about God and humanity.**

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# EXPLORE THE TEXT

## UNITED (GEN. 11:1-4)

<sup>1</sup> The whole earth had the same language and vocabulary. <sup>2</sup> As people migrated from the east, they found a valley in the land of Shinar and settled there. <sup>3</sup> They said to each other, “Come, let’s make oven-fired bricks.” (They used brick for stone and asphalt for mortar.) <sup>4</sup> And they said, “Come, let’s build ourselves a city and a tower with its top in the sky. Let’s make a name for ourselves; otherwise, we will be scattered throughout the earth.”

### VERSE 1

Verse 1 communicates a picture of the comprehensive unity of humanity at that time. Both the introduction and conclusion of the Tower of Babel account have the words, *the whole earth* (see also v. 9). Taken as it is stated, this means the entire population on the earth. Yet there are some Bible teachers who understand this expression to be a figure of speech that refers only to the people in the land of Mesopotamia. In Hebrew, the expression can mean “in all of a particular land” or “in the whole world.” However, given the account’s connection to The Table of Nations, which goes beyond a particular region and refers to every nation in chapter 10, it is best to understand *the whole earth* as referring to all of the inhabitants of the world. Moses’s placement of “the whole earth” at the beginning of the narrative denotes the stark contrast from what the global situation had become at its conclusion.

Moses highlighted the fact that the whole earth shared *the same language and vocabulary*. Using both *language* and *vocabulary* deepens the description of their unity. It may appear that the two words are basically synonymous, but there is an important distinction between them. Today, various groups of people may speak the same language but have different accents and use diverse expressions to communicate with one another. For example, people in England and the United States both speak English, but there are differences in their vocabularies and ways of expression. This was not so with these ancient people. They not only spoke the same language but also communicated with one another in the same way. Highlighting this common language and vocabulary anticipates what would be instrumental in turning their unity into diversity by the end of the narrative. This also reflects the symmetry contained in the account at its beginning and end.

## VERSE 2

Verse 2 provides the location where the people settled. They **migrated from the east**. The Hebrew literally means “eastward.” Not only does this provide necessary information about the physical location where the events in this passage occurred, but “eastward” has theological significance here and elsewhere in Genesis.

It can be argued that the expression “eastward” marks occurrences of separation in Genesis. For instance, when Adam and Eve were banished from the garden of Eden, the cherubim blocked and guarded their access to it from the *east* (3:24). After Cain murdered his brother, Abel, he “went out from the LORD’s presence and lived in the land of Nod, east of Eden” (4:16). As Lot separated himself from Abraham and chose material blessing over God, he “journeyed eastward” (13:10-12). Abraham sent the sons of his concubines “eastward,” away from his son, Isaac, who was God’s elect to carry on the blessing and promises God made to Abraham (25:6). After Jacob deceived his brother, Esau, Jacob had to flee from his family and the land that God had given them as their inheritance, so he went to Aram in the “eastern country” (29:1). This then seems to indicate that the people’s migration eastward denotes a rebellious people who had separated themselves from the will of God, which is the place of blessing.

The **land of •Shinar** was located in the plains of Mesopotamia, which means “the land between two rivers,” referring to the Tigris and Euphrates Rivers, and came to be known as Babylonia. The people of the region come to be known as adversaries of the people of God. Abraham fought and defeated the king of *Shinar* when he rescued Lot (Gen. 14), and the Babylonians rose up against Israel from this region (see Isa. 11:11; Zech. 5:11). The fact that all of the inhabitants in the world **settled there** is greatly significant. It means that they decided to set up a permanent residence there in spite of God’s having commanded them to multiply and fill the earth (Gen. 9:1,7). The disobedient people in this narrative serve to contrast Abram in the next chapter who went “as the LORD had told him” (12:4).

## VERSES 3-4

Now that he established the setting for the narrative, Moses directed the focus of the passage on the words and actions of the people in the land of Shinar. Again, a spirit of unity and collaboration is at the forefront. Two times they exclaimed, “Come, let’s”—**Come, let’s make oven-fired bricks** and **Come, let’s build ourselves a city and a tower**. This would

lead to God’s mimicking response to what they did when He said, “Come, let’s go down” in verse 7.

Moses also employed a wordplay in Hebrew to show the nonsense of their rebellious actions against God. It is literally, “Let’s brick bricks and bake baking,” and they used “asphalt (*hēmar*) for mortar (*hōmer*). This description provides a picture of building practices in ancient Babylon. Unlike the people of Israel who had an abundance of stones to use for building in Palestine, such stones were much more scarce in this region of Mesopotamia. It was similar to the situation in Egypt. While the Egyptians used stone for their pyramids, their main building material was mud brick. Moses’s description of what happened in Shinar would have resonated with his audience who had a great deal of experience making bricks with mud and straw back in Egypt (Ex. 5:6-8).

***Just as their tower would reach to the sky,  
their arrogance and pretentiousness  
reached even higher than that.***

Verse 4 reveals what their objectives were. First, they wanted to build ***a city and a tower with its top in the sky***. Their desire was to have direct access to God and to provide Him a means to come down to them. But God did not need their help and would not permit them to dictate how they would relate to Him or Him to them. This was a display of extreme audacity. Therefore, their second reason for the project being that they wanted to ***make a name*** for themselves is no surprise. This is in contrast to God’s promise to make faithful Abraham’s name great (12:2-3). Third, they wanted to ensure that everyone would stay together. They trusted in themselves and thought they knew what was best for them, not God. From beginning to end, just as their tower would reach to the sky, their arrogance and pretentiousness reached even higher than that.

○ **How are selfishness and creating a name for oneself a display of distrust in God?**

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## DID YOU KNOW?

Ruins of numerous temple-towers, called ziggurats, have been found in the region of ancient Babylon. Some archaeologists believe that ruins of the great temple-tower to Marduk found in the center of Babylon may be the focus of the Babel narrative in Genesis 11.

## REVIEWED (GEN. 11:5-7)

**<sup>5</sup> Then the LORD came down to look over the city and the tower that the humans were building. <sup>6</sup> The LORD said, “If they have begun to do this as one people all having the same language, then nothing they plan to do will be impossible for them. <sup>7</sup> Come, let’s go down there and confuse their language so that they will not understand one another’s speech.”**

### VERSE 5

The phrase, ***Then the LORD***, highlights the abruptness to their plans (see Prov. 16:9). Also, the language here is dripping with irony and emphasizes the greatness of God and the smallness of man, along with the diminutive nature of their self-willed projects and own self-importance. Such arrogance is laughable to God (Ps. 2:4), and all such human projects are temporal. But such is the way of humans. We ignore the all-encompassing omnipotence, omniscience, sovereignty, and glorious majesty of God as we are impressed by the works of our own tiny hands, the accomplishments of creatures who were made from dirt.

***The language here is dripping with irony and emphasizes the greatness of God and the smallness of man.***

### VERSE 6

God was not threatened by these people. His concern was clear. If speaking one language gave them the ability to conspire with one another in unity against God’s will, then they would continue to spiral down this path of rebellion. Every imagination of their depraved hearts would have been their pursuit if left unchecked. Given people’s inclination to sin, no heinous act they conspired to do would be impossible for them, and God would act to keep things on earth from returning to the terrible wickedness that permeated the earth before the flood.

## VERSE 7

In verse 5, the Lord came down to inspect their work. Now, He came down to thwart it. He mimicked them saying, ***Come, let's go down.*** However, the most interesting wordplay God used comes from verse 3. In verse 3, the people made “brick,” a word in Hebrew that has the sound of l-b-n. Here, the word for “confuse” in Hebrew has the sound of n-b-l. God reversed their organized rebellion to build by confusing them. Confusing their ability to communicate with one another shut down their pretentious project. Apparently, their city was not so impressive and tower not so high if God needed to “come down” to look it over. What's more, the people were not so impressive themselves when God came down and so easily ended the project by simply confusing their speech.

 **How can unity of purpose get in the way of fulfilling God's purposes?**

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## KEY DOCTRINE: *The Kingdom*

Christians ought to pray and to labor that the Kingdom may come and God's will be done on earth. (See Matthew 6:9-13; Luke 22:42.)

## DISPERSED (GEN. 11:8-9)

**<sup>8</sup> So from there the LORD scattered them throughout the earth, and they stopped building the city. <sup>9</sup> Therefore it is called Babylon, for there the LORD confused the language of the whole earth, and from there the LORD scattered them throughout the earth.**

## VERSE 8

By God's action of confusing their language so that they could not understand one another, the people were no longer united. They stopped their building project; therefore, by God's hand they fulfilled His purpose for them, scattering apart and filling the earth. It was impossible for them to carry on as they had because they could no longer communicate



with one another. God ultimately demonstrated to them the futility of ignoring His commands. Instead of listening to one another's words, they needed to learn to listen to the words of God.

### VERSE 9

The Tower of Babel account concludes with one more irony. In verse 5, the people wanted to make a name for themselves, and so they did as they are eternally remembered in God's Word. However, it is not as they hoped for because they are renowned for their foolish arrogance and rebellion against God.

What they did is also memorialized by what became the name of the city, ●**Babylon**. This name is phonetically related to the Hebrew word, *bālal*, which is used twice in the account and means "confused." It is a reminder of the confusion of language that occurred and also of the truth that people are not only sinful but obviously not thinking clearly, that is, they are **confused** if they believe anything good ultimately will happen as a result of disobeying God.

○ **What do we learn in these verses about God's sovereignty over His creation?**

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**BIBLE SKILL:** Use a Bible atlas and Bible Dictionary to locate and learn about ancient Babylon or Babylonia.

Babylon plays an important role in biblical history and thought. Look up the name *Babylon* or *Babylonia* in a Bible Dictionary and discover how the term is used in the Old Testament and New Testament. Realize that the sinful condition of this city began in the first century or so after the flood in Noah's day.



